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THE PROBLEM OF ECONOMIC EDUCATION IN OUR DEMOCRACY ----- JOHN P. GILL

An understanding of vital issues involved in the production and distribution of resources is becoming more vital every day. With the "closing of the frontier" in the sense of settlement of the continent, the people of this country began taking stock of their natural, human, and cultural resources. Two great wars and one great depression have taught us that even in this great country of ours our natural endowment is neither inexhaustible nor indestructible. Great economic and political decisions had to be made, are being made, and will have to be made in the future. It is upon this sum total of complex decisions that our democratic survival seems to hinge.

It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that knowing more about how the people of this country go about "making a living" will give us a better insight into the kind of country this is, i.e., how our economic system functions. Before we as a nation can preach our better way of life, we must be in a position to understand this way of life ourselves. To defend free enterprise, we must be in a position to know what it is and how it functions in this country. From observation it can be said quite frankly that we need to increase vastly our economic literacy.

Labor-management relations, social security, farm price supports, credit creation, effects of inflation, free enterprise, our corporate systems, etc.-- these are some of the topics that puzzle many people including the college graduate, the business man, and the farmer.

The following is a suggested list of questions which focus attention on American free enterprise and the social-economic problems involved in it:

Economic Resources

What are our natural resources and how can they best be used? How can we most effectively utilize human resources and skills? What is the importance of technological resources? How are capital resources created and used? What are we as a nation doing to conserve certain vital natural resources?

The National Economy Today

What are the objectives and achievements of our economy? How does a free enterprise system function? What is the place of profits in a free enterprise economy? What is expected of our economy in the present crisis? How can we expand national output?

Problems of Economic Controls

What is the role of the Federal Reserve System? Can we control inflation through taxation? What are the problems of price and wage control? What are the problems of rationing? How and when should controls be removed?

Basic Economic Problems

Is concentration of economic power a national problem? What are the problems of small business? What is the role of organized labor? What is the role of Agriculture? What are the problems of labor-management relations? What is America's role in the world economy? What are the effects on society of new inventions and technological advances? What are the problems of social security? What are the effects of the government's agricultural policy? What are the problems of international economic development?

Each question proposed in the above outline will provoke considerable discussion and study. The great majority of people in this country sincerely believes that the American economic system based on tremendous natural, cultural, and human resources can more than match other economic systems in the world. It is very appropriate that the citizen be informed concerning the processes that cultivate this resourcefulness.

How should this problem of economic education in our democracy be resolved? One answer lies in secondary education. It might be that public education will assume this role eventually. As a result, at least that large segment of high school students that does not possess the financial means and/or the inclination to go to college will be given a broad introduction to the subject of economics.

At the present time our high school curriculum gives meager attention to economic institutions, problems and issues. Appropriate materials for instruction are scarce, and, most critical of all, the teachers generally have had little training or experience in economic affairs. Yet the American public school is our agent for preserving and strengthening our way of life. These schools constitute the principal means for economic education.

Another approach to the solution of the problem of economic education in our democracy is through adult education. Centers of business and industry, like Atlanta, should take advantage of this method of education. Atlanta is well endowed with educational institutions on whose staffs are competent economists. Furthermore, the regional offices of both business and government offer another excellent source of practicing economists who could participate as consultants on institute or workshop programs in the field of economic education.

A method of solving in part the problem of economic education in our democracy would be based on graduation requirements of colleges and universities. It might be possible to require that each student take some basic work in economics. Such a requirement, however, would demand a reasonable answer to the question: "What should a basic course in economics include?"

Not all of the tools needed for the solution of the problem of economic education in our democracy are available. According to the Joint Council on

Economic Education,¹ basic research is needed in the following areas: (1) problems and needs of youth in the area of economic living; (2) the current status of economic education in local elementary and secondary school programs; (3) the evaluation of current textbooks for economics and problems courses in secondary schools; (4) types of materials most useful in promoting economic education in local schools; and (5) economic content for a basic course in the pre-service training of teachers.

Joint Council on Economic Education

After World War II many people in various businesses and professions became keenly aware of the great need for economic education in this country. Business concerns felt the need to "educate" their employees in the ways of the economic institutions and traditions.

It was during this period that some of the members of the School of Education of New York University decided to make some concrete move in the direction of solving this problem of economic education in our democracy.

A plan was devised, and a financial sponsor was sought. The Committee for Economic Development (CED) reviewed the plan, approved it without modification, and made a grant of \$15,000 for an initial project.

New York University initiated the first workshop on Economic Education in 1948, and Professor G. Derwood Baker of New York University was appointed as director of this project. A committee of educators and economists was formed to advise on planning the program. This committee included Professor J. P. McCutchen, Chairman, Department of the Social Studies, School of Education, New York University; A. D. H. Kaplan, Senior Economist, The Brookings Institutions; Boris Shishkin, Economist, American Federation of Labor; J. Fredric Dewhurst, Economist, Twentieth Century Fund; Morris Livingston, Economist, Office of Business Economics, U. S. Department of Commerce; E. J. Coil, Director, National Planning Association; and Sylvia Stone, Research Economist, Committee for Economic Development.

Other workshops developed since that time in the following states: California, Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, New York, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Texas, and Wisconsin.

In January 1949, the Joint Council was incorporated under the laws of the District of Columbia and is controlled by its charter provisions. Portions of articles of incorporation are quoted to describe its purposes:²

"The Joint Council is a non-profit, educational organization created to assist school systems, improve the quality of social and economic education through curriculum research, workshops, seminars, in-service training programs and the preparation of materials for teachers and students.

¹The author is indebted to the following men for much of the material which follows: Dr. G. Derwood Baker, Director; and Mr. F. D. Wish, Jr., Assistant Director, Joint Council on Economic Education, 444 Madison Avenue, New York 22, New York.

²Joint Council on Economic Education, Summary Report of the Joint Council on Economic Education, 1948-1951, 444 Madison Avenue, New York 22, New York.

"The Joint Council will endeavor to stimulate and coordinate the efforts of professional and lay groups which are interested in improving economic education and are committed to our democratic tradition of academic freedom and academic responsibility. The Council will not promote the special interest of any group, engage in propaganda activities, nor attempt to influence legislative action."

According to Dr. G. Derwood Baker, the Director of the Joint Council on Economic Education, "The area of economic understanding offers education the opportunity to work cooperatively with business, labor, government, and economic research organizations on the problems vital to the survival of democracy and democratic institutions."

For a more detailed picture of the activities of the Joint Council on Economic Education, the reader is referred to the publication listed in footnote number 2.

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